THE JEW IN BUSINESS.

A well known rabbi's view of his race's place in the world of commerce and finance —A reply to some accepted theories of the Hebrew's business success.

I AM asked to answer two questions that are often heard in the modern commercial and social world—"What constitutes the Hebrew's special talent for mercantile life?" and "To what is his remarkable business success to be attributed?"

Although not a son of Erin, I am obliged to answer the first question by asking another: "*Has* the Hebrew a special aptitude for commerce?" Strange as it may seem, our answer is a decided "No." To no nation were mercantile pursuits so abhorrent, originally, as to the Jewish race. The traditions, nature, and character of the Jew forbade his being a trader. He became one only by compulsion.

Read the pages of Jewish history, and you will find overwhelming proof of my assertion. Was Abraham a trader? The only transaction of a business nature recorded of the great shepherd prince was that in which Ephron shamefully cheated him, in selling him a barren cave for four hundred shekels. That he did not possess the business faculty ascribed to the Semitic race is further proven by the fact of his refusal of a share of the spoils after the battle of Siddim. His son was a farmer, and he became rich because his soil yielded him an abundant crop. Jacob required twenty years of unceasing labor to reach the stage of being self supporting. It is true that Joseph possessed the quality of shrewdness in business; his policy during the years of drought proved this amply. Yet in all his actions he was unselfish. How well he knew his family's utter lack of business qualification is shown by the fact that instead of settling them in a large city, he asked Pharaoh to grant them a grazing land, the little province of Goshen.

The only thing Moses, God's greatest lawgiver, carried away with him on the departure from Egypt, was a coffin containing the bones of Joseph. In Palestine itself, the Israelites leaned strongly towards agricultural life. Sheer necessity, and the fear that agriculture alone would not support them, made one, only one tribe—the tribe of Zebulon—turn to mercantile pursuits; a fact partly due, no doubt, to the influence of the neighboring Phœnicians, the most successful traders of the east.

During the period from the Exodus until the reign of Solomon, the Jews as a whole were not a mercantile nation. Solomon's relations with Hiram influenced some of his people to make trading voyages to Spain, and even as far as Ophir. The fact that other nations followed the fortunes of war, considering martial prowess as the goal of all manly virtues, added in no mean measure to the gradual evolution of the original Jewish trait, developing merchants and tradesmen out of a nation of tillers of the soil. Commerce, with its slow and legitimate profits, was distasteful to the powerful nations, who by virtue of their numbers could swoop down on weaker tribes, and by pillage and plunder secure tremendous booty. While Greece and Rome devoted themselves to art and conquest, their people became unaccustomed to the practical sides of life.

Then there was the influence of class distinctions. India had its pariahs; Greece its helots. Moses discouraged a division of the people into castes and classes. All men were equal. No occupation was considered a bar to the highest dignities of the land. Every man must be master of a craft. Knowledge was not allowed as a spade to dig with—which means that it was not lawful to use knowledge for earthly gain. Thus we see Rabbi Yitzchak, Rabbi Jochanan ben Zakkai, and the great Hillel, all possessing a trade, the latter being a wood chopper. Saul was a driver of donkeys, David a shepherd, Amos a gatherer of figs. Jesus was the son of a carpenter; most of the apostles were tradesmen or fishermen. In later times, Baruch Spinoza, one of the world's foremost thinkers, was an optician; Moses Maimonides, another great philosopher, was a physician; Moses Mendelssohn was a bookkeeper in a silk factory.

In the medieval ages the Jews were barred from all pursuits save that of commerce. Here necessity, bitter necessity, made them what they became. Do not let us forget that rivers do not accidentally flow by large cities, but that large cities are built designedly on the shores of great rivers. The polar bear does not dwell in the icy north because of his warm fur; his thick coat formed itself to shield him against the cold climate of the arctic regions. Sheer necessity is the force that made the Jews a commercial nation, a people of merchants rather than of farmers, as they once were.

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I will now try to answer the second question—to what is the business success of the Hebrew attributable?

"Rich as a Jew," goes an old English adage. Like many other adages, this too is based upon erroneous premises. I doubt whether there are any very rich Jews, a few instances excepted—that is, Jews who measured by the modern standard of wealth can truly be called rich. Moreover, I venture to question whether any extraordinary business success crowns the efforts of the Jewish race in general.

Take, for instance, the United States. Ever since we became a nation, and long before that glorious event, Jews have lived in our land. They have witnessed our golden days of prosperity, have lived under the very rays of the enormous wealth amassed by the genius and enterprise of our people. Yet there is not a single American Jew whose wealth can even approximatively compare with that of such modern Crœsuses as the Astors, the Vanderbilts, the Goulds, the Rockefellers, and others. Nay, I will assert that here in New York, all the Jews from the Battery to Harlem do not possess so much as the single fortune of the Vanderbilts. This assertion is not only true as regards New York, but is equally applicable to other parts of the United States. There are wealthy Jews in Philadelphia, yet the wealth of one Drexel outweighs all their possessions. In Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, and other large cities, commerce is not controlled by the Jews, but by the Aryan race. The great "soulless corporations," the trusts, the railroads, all are dominated by men who are not Jews. Yet thoughtless people raise the cry of capitalistic Jews, millionaire Hebrews, and so on.

Let us examine how the Jews came to be regarded as exceptionally gifted in amassing money. The Jew is an oriental. In the Orient, where the social condition of woman prevents her from coming in contact with the outer world, where she is confined within the gilt cage of the monotonous harem life, the husband sought to satisfy the unstilled longings of the harem's inmates by presenting them with costly jewels, rich dresses, and similar glittering luxuries. Thus we read in the Bible that Abimelech gave Sarah a thousand pieces of silver wherewith to purchase herself a veil; that Eliasar presented Rebecca with the rarest and costliest gifts. The harem, it is true, has fallen, but the love of ornamentation remained. Thus we observe the fact—a thing which I cannot condemn too strongly—that women of the Semitic race too often cover themselves with more jewels than good taste and refinement would permit. This desire for ornamentation becomes, in people of inferior education, gross ostentation.

Now, this hoarding of jewels and precious stones, a tendency considerable in many respects, had its justification to some extent. For centuries the Jew was the ball that every Christian power could pitch and toss at heart's content. Any bigoted priest, any stupid peasant, any impecunious robber baron, any covetous king, could stir up the most brutal instinct of a brutalized crowd. Any cry, no matter whence it came, could fan the embers of prejudice into the lurid fires of relentless persecution. The edict of an imbecile prince, the order of some medieval Haman, sufficed to drive the Jew from his home at short notice. Is it a wonder, then, that he sought to invest his money in property that could easily be moved in case of danger? His house the mob could burn, but his silver and gold he was able to hide about his person and save. Thus it happened that the Jew, being compelled to invest his earnings in gold and silver, in trinkets, jewels, and precious stones, was forever under the suspicion of rolling in wealth. The rabble, always thoughtless, forgot that what they took for luxuries, the fruits of what they were pleased to call the usurious practices of the Jew, constituted in most cases his only safe and available possessions.

Another cause for the prevalent impression of the Jew's wealth was his ever manifested sense for charity and deeds of kindness. Who will deny this noble trait of the Jewish character? His charity to others, his exemplary family life, his love of wife and children, have always been the "urim and thummim" of the Jew. These virtues were—and, thank God, still are—the very soul of the Jew's life and being. Behold our hospitals, our orphanages, our educational institutions, our temples. Are they not all poems in marble singing the sweet hymns of benevolence and kindness? The religion of the Jew is based upon acts of kindness. Charity—which according to the Hebrew language is but *zadakah*, or "justice"—is the crowning glory of the Jew. Zadakah washes away sins and atones the godhead. Yet even the virtues of the Jew, his love for his family, and his devotion to mercy and kindness, were brought into play by the rabble in order to calumniate God's chosen people.

I say again that the original trait of the Jew was abhorrence of amassing riches. Wealth was not counted a mark of distinction among his people. Science and scholarship were honored and revered. The teacher, the thinker, the master of God's lore, these were Zion's aristocracy. I repeat then, that, in comparison to the Aryans, Jews are not wealthy, and that the exceptions, the comparatively few rich Hebrews, have generally made noble use of their money. In proof of this I need only recite such names as Rothschild, Hirsch, Montefiore, Schiff, Seligman, and others.

If the Jews are more successful than their Aryan neighbors, the main cause thereof is not a miracle, nor a special interference of Providence; their success is mainly due to their love of their families, their devotion to their elders, their habits of temperance.

"Let there be light!" was the divine command. Oh, for the light of knowledge to displace the darkness of prejudice; for where there is no prejudice there can be no hatred, but only mutual forbearance, mutual esteem, and the love of God's sweetest gift, peace.

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